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ABSTRACT

Although self-actualization is often considered a need to be met after more basic needs are fulfilled, experience with a development project in four impoverished and isolated Colombian communities indicates that development of human potential can be an integral part of overall development. An environment that supports the development of human potential also has the ability to fulfill basic biological needs. The people in the four communities where Project PROMESA operated lived in an environment that met some of those needs, among them freedom from fear and opportunities for affiliation and love, but which did not satisfy basic biological requirements for a healthy environment or opportunities for self-actualization. The development projects designed to improve the health of young children by providing latrines, garbage disposal, clean water, and medical care were also designed to provide opportunities for adult community members to participate in planning and implementation and to develop their leadership abilities. This enabled community members to maintain and improve the environment after the project ended. (IS)

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Organizing Environments to Enhance the Development of Persons and Communities in Isolated Regions of Colombia: A Challenge to the Development of Human Potential

Marta Arango & Glen Nimnicht
Medellin, Columbia

March 1983

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INTRODUCTION

When we think of developing human potential in developed, developing and under-developed nations, there is a convergence of ideas. First a developed nation must be one that has accomplished its major objective. Since nations should exist to serve the people who make up that nation, logically the national objectives must be stated explicitly or implicitly in terms of the development of human potential of those people. Under-developed nations would be that group that has made little or no progress towards developing the human potential of their people while developing nations are on their way towards achieving these objectives.

Using this idealistic and simple approach it would be easy to determine the concept different national groups have about the development of human potential by simply studying the national goal. We could expect to find differences based upon different cultural, religious, philosophical and social beliefs. These differences could be reflected in what different societies considered "developed" to mean. For example, a society that valued strong traditional family structure and clearly defined expectations according to sex differences, could consider itself developed even though women in that culture were under-educated. Another group could think that a country can not possibly be developed when the women are treated as inferior to men. Nevertheless an analysis of national objectives would yeild a definition of "human development" for each national group.

This system should work but it does not. Why not? There are several reasons. One reason is that nations do not state their objectives in terms of human development. They state objectives in terms of gross national product, agricultural production, industrial growth, and balance of payment, none of which have anything to do with human development. Another reason is that nations are not composed of more or less homogeneous groups. To the contrary they are typically very heterogeneous groups. Most nations are widely divided by social class differences, cultural differences, and religious differences. So, there is not one national concept of human development. A third reason is that different sub-groups believe that the development of human potential for their group is suppressed by another group or is contrary to the development in another group. Examples are the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland and the upper classes in developing countries who see development of the human potential in the lower classes coming only at the expense of their own development.

We think we can contribute to the understanding of what it means to develop human potential if we focus our attention on development of human potential of the very poor illiterate people of the world. It is with those groups of people where the greatest advance might be made for each unit of effort expanded.

As a basis for our discussion we will use project PROMESA in four small communities on the Pacific Coast of Colombia just south of Panama. Five years ago in these four communities the illiteracy rate was 70%, there were almost no latrines (for example, El Valle, a town of 2000

had one latrine), the garbage was thrown in the streets for the pigs and chickens to eat, the water was not pure enough to drink, stagnant water (breeding ponds for mosquitoes) stood under many of the houses. In other words the people who lived there would probably be considered as being a part of the most under-developed people in the world.

WHAT WE MEAN BY DEVELOPING HUMAN POTENTIAL

We believe that the development of human potential is a personal affair; it is self-development; no one does it for you, you do it for yourself. A family, a community and a country contribute to an environment that first defines what human development should be for individuals and then determines what access individuals have to the means for personal development. Within this environment there are many vectors of forces that impinge upon the individual and interact to determine the final level of development the individual achieves.

From our point of view the degree to which an environment can foster the human development of the individuals who live in that environment is a measure of the development of the environment. This concept can be applied to a community, a state or a nation; or it can be applied to sub-groups such as different social classes or cultural groups within the same political sub-division.

Even though we are dealing with self-development within a specific social cultural context there must be some universal characteristics of what it means to develop human potential.

We are suggesting that an environment that supports the development of human potential has the ability to fulfill the following needs:

1. The basic biological needs include food, clothing, shelter, a dry place to sleep and a healthy physical environment.

2. The need to be free of fear includes the fear of an immediate physical danger from things such as wild animals, kidnapers, robbers, etc., and freedom from fear of the less immediate possibility of atomic bombs, etc.

3. The need to have satisfying affiliations with other people includes the need to have frequent interactions with other people, the need to feel that you belong to a family, a group, neighborhood or community.

4. The need to experience love includes the need to give and receive love from a lover and from a family or friends.

5. The need for self-actualization as we understand Maslow is a high order behavior that many strive for but few ever achieve. The way we will be using the term, in part or in one form or another it can be achieved by more ordinary people and it is something everyone needs. It is a feeling of self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment or having "made it" in some way. It is when an old person without boasting or conceit can say or think, "I have accomplished most of the things I think are important in life." Or when an artist finishes a painting and thinks, "It's good--it's really good." Or when a poor black man who is the "captain" of a small boat on a river, after getting it through and around a series of rapids and through shallows and deeps, can say to the people who have been helping, "Relax, the river is mine."

If the fulfillment of these needs equals the development of human potential then they can become our criterion to measure the degree of development of an environment. Instead of economic measures these basic needs will help us talk more intelligently about developed and under-developed countries.

First, it seems obvious that different environments may be better for developing some aspects of human development rather than others. Second, some environments are better, over all, than others to promote human development. Third, no country is fully developed. Fourth, different cultures may contribute to different definitions of what human development means but those cultures may also restrict human development in some aspects.

Now to refine our concepts of human development we would like to apply them to the four small communities in the state of Choco, Colombia, S.A.

THE SETTING

The setting of project PROMESA is in four communities on the Pacific Coast of Colombia just south of Panama. The only access to this area is by small airplane from Medellin to Bahia Solano, the largest of the four communities, or by boat from Buenaventura, a twenty-four hour trip. The airport that serves Bahia Solano is located near a road between Bahia Solano and El Valle. This road is about 10 miles long and is the only one in the area. It takes about an hour to travel the ten miles in an "express bus"--an ageless truck whose make and model are unknown. From Valle it is a three-hour trip by boat along the coast to Nuqui and Pangui, the other two communities in the project. In this region where the jungle comes down to the sea the main ways of surviving are to collect fruit from the jungle, fish and grow a few things, or cut lumber by hand. The best jobs are government jobs as teacher, police, or something like an agricultural extension agent. The few people who have some money are the store and bar owners, but they are only relatively better off than the other people.

When project PROMESA started, garbage was thrown in the streets and on the beach; there were no toilets except in the missions of the Catholic nuns; Valle, a town of 2000 people, had one latrine; there was not safe water for drinking in any of the communities; the chickens and pigs roamed the streets eating the human waste and garbage; the children played in the same places; large parts of each town were flooded on the average of every fifteen days;

and the thatch roofs of the houses were the nesting place for rats.

There were no health services of any kind in three of the communities. A hospital was under construction in the Bahia Solano. There were elementary schools in all four communities that were open sometimes—maybe fifty percent of the school year. Valle had the beginning years of a technical high school and a complete high school for teacher training; the other communities had no high schools. The illiteracy among the adults was more than 70%.

The Objectives at the Beginning of the Project

Project PROMESA was designed to improve this environment for the healthy development of young children. The first set of objectives were:

1. To prepare a group of community people to work effectively with the parents of young children in the areas of education (general, occupational, early childhood), health and sanitation to solve their own problems.

2. To develop some intermediate technology with resources from the environment to facilitate the solution of some local problems.

3. To improve the educational, health and sanitation conditions of the four communities.

4. To organize in an integrated fashion the different community services (education, health and sanitation).

5. To study the feasibility of using a methodology for development of social programs based on maximum use of the resources of the environment and the cultural knowledge and experience of its people.

6. To determine which of the main strategies used are more effective for the achievement of proposed objectives and analyze the implications for administration of similar programs in other contexts.

The second set of objectives were:

1. To improve the parents' ability to provide a better environment for the healthy development of their child by improving their life support skills such as gardening, cooking, and sewing; improve their economic capacity by learning crafts, carpentry, to fish or farm better, and improve their basic education.

2. To improve the capacity of each community to maintain the advances made by PROMESA and improve upon them by fostering community organizations for social development, and training people in leadership skills.

3. To improve the capacity of each community for economic development by forming production groups, utilizing community resources for multi-purposes, and determining what the community could produce and sell under existing circumstances.

In short, the setting was isolated, dirty, hot, humid, and unhealthy and with great potential. The people were poor, unmotivated, sickly, under-trained, and under-educated. The project was ambitious, complex and difficult.

Some basic assumptions we made were probably true and are still true:

1. In a setting like this there must be a critical mass to start social change--a single small project is not enough.

2. To sustain change there must be an accumulative effect that accelerates the rate of change. For example, an educational program must reach the family in many ways to start the change and to reinforce it because the initial environment is negative and tends to contract the change. This is crucial, because as people start to experience some success, their expectations exceed the ability of a project to satisfy them unless the rate of change is constantly accelerating.

If our analysis is correct, we had two basic problems when we started project PROMESA. Satisfy the basic biological needs and provide opportunities for self-actualization. This observation is based upon hindsight. We did not think in this way when we started the project. We saw what most other people see. A poor, unhealthy environment, decaying houses and malnourished sick children. We did not see the opportunities for affiliation and love or the lack of opportunities for self-actualization; what we have realized later is that not seeing the lack of opportunities for self-actualization is not seeing a crucial element in human development. When self-actualization is seen as the top of a pyramid of needs, something that few people ever achieve, it is not seen as being important in a project like PROMESA. As we continue to work in the project we become more convinced that helping people achieve some sense of self-actualization is crucial to the success of the project.

A Re-analysis of the Basic Needs

When we started the project the people in general had a dry, warm place to sleep. They had access to the rivers and the ocean for fish and the jungle for fruit. They could successfully grow yucca, rice, pineapples and onions.

So, in terms of solving the basic biological need, what was needed most was to improve the environment to make it a healthier place to live.

The people were free from fear in two ways. One, there are not dangerous wild animals; no one locked their houses because there was little or nothing to take; and there were not the violent, emotional fights inspired by machismo and aguardiente that one finds in some parts of Colombia. Two, they were ignorant of the fear they might have felt over the possibility of atomic war at the international level or civil war in Colombia. The possibility of civil war became a reality for a short period of time in 1980 but soon died, so freedom from immediate physical danger and ignorance satisfied the second need.

If we compare their freedom from fear to others', this need is probably better fulfilled in these four communities than in the upper-class residential areas of Medellin or Bogota, where there is a real fear of being robbed or kidnaped. Or in the United States, where the threat of immediate extinction by atomic warfare hangs heavy over many people.

The environment seemed to more than provide for affiliation. People do not work on a fixed schedule, so everyone had a lot of time to talk, play games and attend meetings. The communities are so small that

everyone knows their neighbors. They can identify with a family, a barrio and the town.

The environment seems to be a place where love can flourish as well as anywhere. People have time; the need to compete is not great; birth, sickness and death take place at home; there is an extended family; moral standards are lax and there are little or no pressures for marriages of convenience.

Self-actualization in this environment, however, must have been hard to obtain. What was missing in this environment when we started project PROMESA were ways of becoming self-actualized--there were no opportunities for developing intellectual or artistic abilities and there were no outlets for leadership ability. The environment showed no signs of cooperation or initiative. Political figures organized their parties and opposed each other, but nothing but false starts came of it. Public building had been started but not finished; motors rusted away without being used. There were no horses or cows, no way of preserving fish; broken bridges that could be easily repaired remained broken. There were no cooperatives, no community action program. The environment in one respect took its toll in disease and early death but in another way it was too easy to exist there. Anyone could go to the jungle for fruit and the ocean for fish.

It is interesting to note, however, that with the heat, bad water, malaria and garbage in the streets, and the decaying houses, there was a lack of fear in this environment and a place where people could have satisfying affiliations and love.

The unsatisfied need for some form of self-actualization may help to account for many undesirable behaviors on the part of poor people. For example, in Choco and other parts of Colombia, a large part of the meager incomes of the poor goes to buy the right to sit and socialize in a bar or go to a discoteca, and in the process, drink oneself into oblivion. In Colombia the educated people talk about the mass as "they" or "farmer" (campesino). "They are degenerate. "They" drink too much on weekends and holidays. "They" need more sports or television or other diversions. Probably what "they" need most is education, participation and some other real means of self-actualization.

When we started the project PROMOSA there did not seem to be anyone that we could identify who really was self-actualized, or had self-actualizing experiences. We wanted to underline the statement <u>that we could identify</u> because a few months after the project started we could identify people who had this potential. When we started project PROMESA we had two clear objectives. One was to develop a better environment for the healthy development of young children, which, of course, could be reworded to "satisfying their basic needs." The second objective was to develop the ability of the parents to maintain and improve that environment after the project was finished.

We used a process of helping mothers move from little personal successes of helping their pre-school child learn something to larger personal successes, to successes with the family, to neighborhood successes, and finally to community successes. We were aware that this process was related to

reinforcing a positive self-concept which was essential if the woman was going to help her child.

We introduced adult education programs as a way of reinforcing the education of children and helping the parents obtain the skills they need to satisfy some of the basic needs of children.

We felt that an accumulative effect was essential. The idea was that in this kind of environment, there are negative conditions set in the beginning. In the health program, for instance, the people in the beginning are suffering from very bad conditions. To help them get good water to drink is not enough because they still have malaria, an unhealthy environment, and lack of health services. As these conditions improve, the people's ability to make additional improvements increases rapidly.

In education the same kind of thing is at work. To begin with the school only operates part of the time; the teachers are poorly trained with little or no equipment; the parents are illiterate so they cannot help the child. There is not much evidence in the environment that it is important to read and write. To put a little education into this environment is like trying to fill a dry well with an eye dropper. There needs to be a system of reinforcement working where different inputs can have an accumulative effect, and so that a minimum of educational benefits will seep away.

We helped the people form community committees to participate in the decision-making process and with the expectation they would take over the project. We helped production groups of farmers, fishermen or carpenters to organize themselves and cooperate to improve their economic position.

What we had not seen so clearly was that we must do two things at the same time. We must work at the concrete level of satisfying basic human needs--latrines, garbage, water and medical care--and at the same time, the non-material level of self-actualization.

In other words developing an environment that will encourage people to seek self-actualization cannot be postposed until the environment satisfies the basic biological needs of people. As a matter of fact it may be a necessary prerequisite. Furthermore, since self-actualization depends upon developing special talents that require education or special training, the education for the uneducated and the poor cannot be just utilitarian. It must include some of the non-utilitarian ideas that have motivated people to think of things beyond their immediate presence. We are going to have to take some of those scientific and philosophical ideas that have been reserved for the educational elite and translate them into language people can understand. Searching for means of self-actualization for people demands non-material development which leads to material gain.

This idea stands in complete opposition to the economic model, that put forward the idea that only tangible materials will serve as rewards or motivation.

The romantic notion that is often expressed now in social development circles that the poor uneducated people know how and can solve many of their problems if given the resources approaches this idea. So do the successful outcomes of community-based projects. What has happened is the process has allowed some local people to become more self-actualized and to lead others.

Our notion is clear that for human development everyone needs some form of self-actualization as well as the satisfaction of their basic needs.

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2. To develop some intermediate technology with resources from the environment to facilitate the solution of some local problems.

3. To improve the educational, health and sanitation conditions of the four communities.

4. To organize in an integrated fashion the different community services (education, health and sanitation).

5. To study the feasibility of using a methodology for development of social programs based on maximum use of the resources of the environment and the cultural knowledge and experience of its people.

6. To determine which of the main strategies used are more effective for the achievement of proposed objectives and analyze the implications for administration of similar programs in other contexts.

The second set of objectives were:

1. To improve the parents' ability to provide a better environment for the healthy development of their child by improving their life support skills such as gardening, cooking, and sewing; improve their economic capacity by learning crafts, carpentry, to fish or farm better, and improve their basic education.

2. To improve the capacity of each community to maintain the advances made by PROMESA and improve upon them by fostering community organizations for social development, and training people in leadership skills.

3. To improve the capacity of each community for economic development by forming production groups, utilizing community resources for multi-purposes, and determining what the community could produce and sell under existing circumstances.

In short, the setting was isolated, dirty, hot, humid, and unhealthy and with great potential. The people were poor, unmotivated, sickly, under-trained, and under-educated. The project was ambitious, complex and difficult.